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Conservation and Community Action: Bringing the Message Home

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I

Amongst the many problems that archivists face in the fulfillment of their responsibilities, perhaps the most intractable tasks involve the preservation of those historical materials in their custody. It is not therefore surprising that professional meetings and seminars devote at least a portion of their allotted time to some aspect of paper or photographic conservation. At these sessions, conservators often discuss the pressing need for greater community involvement in conservation programs and address the broader issues of institutional, state, and regional cooperative efforts.[1] But they also tend to emphasize that a proper conservation program requires highly skilled and experienced personnel, a well equipped facility, and substantial, on-going financial support. This type of comprehensive program often excludes modest-size establishments, especially those isolated from like-minded archives seeking a cooperative arrangement.

At this time, it is unlikely that archivists will witness an increase in agency support for archival conservation work. Small local archives should be encouraged to send "piece-work" to the professionally staffed labs of larger institutions in their regions or to band together to fund communal centers for paper and photographic conservation. Though increased costs and shrinking budgets may price the "cure" of professional conservation services beyond the reach of many institutions, archivists are not powerless to promote the cause of "preventative medicine" within their own communities. Indeed, beyond damage caused by "inherent fault,"[2] much of the document and artifact deterioration faced by archivists today can be traced directly to earlier owner neglect and ignorance of basic conservation practices. As a profession, we should not limit ourselves to mending and repairing damaged materials when greater public awareness about conservation practices can result in better preserved and ordered collections.

It should be emphasized that such a conservation education program, though planned to adhere to the highest professional standards, is not a substitute for an on-going conservation program, nor is it intended to turn laymen into instant conservators. The goal of a conservation education program is to acquaint the public with the basic elements of paper, photographic and artifact conservation and to encourage them to take preventive steps to preserve such materials in their care. Futhermore, an educational program has the added benefit of drawing attention to the archives itself and to its special mission in the community. In the end, conservation seminars or workshops not only alert people to the value of their personal papers, books and photographs, they also demonstrate to them how a local library or archives may serve as the most appropriate depository for such materials and establish it as the

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place to turn to for information on preservation. Thus, in addition to serving an educational purpose, the local promotion of conservation in the community may very well lead the sponsoring archives to valuable additions to its holdings.

These hypotheses were borne out by the experience of the Archives of Appalachia, which developed an experimental conservation education program in response to grass-roots demand.

II

Located on the campus of East Tennessee State University, the Archives of Appalachia opened its main facility in the University's Sherrod Library on September 1, 1978. From its inception, the Archives staff sought to forge ties with the community and to generate interest in the Archives' collecting efforts. The staff were particularly surprised by the steady stream of telephone calls and letters concerning conservation problems.

After an analysis of the questions raised by the public, the Archives staff identified those areas of paper and photographic conservation that attracted the most inquiries. The areas of demonstrated community interest included: the proper storage of papers, photographs and books, the restoration of prematurely aged or damaged books (usually as a result of inherent fault), and the necessary measures to counteract flood damage, mold growth and vermin infestation. Often these inquiries reached staff attention only after the fact, when restoration and not preservation constituted the only viable course of action. This research analysis underscored the pressing need to alert the community as to how they might avoid such problems in the future. As a result, the Archives staff decided to compile and distribute basic conservatorial advice that might anticipate problems and suggest possible remedies.

This took the form of a booklet entitled A Primer for the Conservation of Book and Manuscript Materials. Designed for the lay public, the publication discusses the history of paper and its construction, the causes of paper and book deterioration, and the treatment of paper and photographic materials suffering from flood damage. It also includes a glossary of often-used conservatorial terms, a selected bibliography, a list of sources of supplies and equipment, and for those faced with major restoration projects, a list of qualified conservators and conservatorial organizations.[3] Copies were distributed without charge to local libraries, schools, historical societies, and civic organizations. The staff also mailed them to individuals who contacted the Archives for advice concerning conservation.

Although the Primer was an important educational tool, its limitations soon became apparent. Those in the community who had sought advice in the first place benefited from the receipt and use of the booklet and from further recommendations the staff might have provided. Yet even with the organizational mailing a vast majority of citizens remained unaware of conservation problems and of the fact that the Archives could provide the community with consultative services in that area. Clearly a more direct approach for communicating conservation concerns and techniques to the community was needed.

A conference approach offered the Archives a fresh and exciting vehicle for the realization of its educational objectives. As a public event, such

a meeting could be easily publicized and flexible enough to accomodate different community interests. The conference format would bring together area experts and people seeking conservatorial advice. The widespread community participation would heighten local consciousness and, it was hoped, generate a commitment to foster conservation activities. Finally, the hosting of such a conference would provide the Archives with an opportunity to draw public attention to its own activities and to its role in the preservation of the region's heritage.

From the outset of our conference planning efforts, we pursued two complementary objectives. First, we sought to devise a community meeting program that would serve our educational purposes while, at the same time, attracting the widest possible public audience. Second, we searched for an appropriate funding agency to underwrite the costs of the conference, therefore allowing the Archives to offer the program to the community without fees of any kind. At the center of our conference plans stood a series of workshops, each devoted to a specific aspect of conservation - paper, photographs or paintings - and led by a noted specialist. The American Association for State and Local History helped to identify people who could serve as workshop leaders. These sessions offered opportunities for the audience to meet and exchange information with an expert who enjoyed considerable experience in dealing with the practical side of preservation as well as the professional side of restoration. This interaction between the speakers and the public was maximized by limiting formal presentations and by providing ample time for question and answer periods, followed by unstructured informal discussions.

The search for an appropriate funding agency was successfully ended with the discovery that the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) distributes a portion of its resources annually to state-wide organizations. These state committees in turn employ their NEH allotments to support "humanistic" activities that seek to enrich the lives of the out-of-school, adult population. A budget for the conference totaling $1,000 including speakers fees, travel expenses, publicity, printing and refreshments was approved for funding by the Tennessee Committee for the Humanities.

To encourage a substantial and diverse attendance, the conference itself was scheduled for Friday night and Saturday, April 27 and 28, 1978, in the Reading and Research Room of the Archives. As a result of an extensive publicity campaign, a total of 351 people attended the meetings with some of the sessions reaching an enrollment of nearly ninety. Many attendees brought along books, papers, photographs and paintings, and received advice on their care and restoration. Throughout, discussions were lively and enthusiastic.

Subsequent community feedback from those who participated described the conference experience as enjoyable and enlightening. Indeed, since the meetings the Archives has received increased numbers of inquiries from the public regarding not only matters of conservation but a variety of subjects. This apparent success pleased our staff, but it also pleased the Tennessee Committee for the Humanities, which is currently considering a state-wide conservation education program employing the Archives' experiment as its model.

The significance of programs promoting community action and conservation will depend upon their adoption by archives and other appropriate agencies throughout the United States. If we as archivists are to insure the survival of the nation's documentary heritage, we must move out of the rarefied atmosphere of our conservation laboratories and into the community. Ignorance and neglect remain the greatest enemies of our preservation efforts; they militate against the effects of the most upright archival principles. The widespread

use of wood fiber paper and non-archival film processing further exacerbates these problems. But as this essay hopes to demonstrate, community education is one positive step towards improving the conditions under which records are produced and stored. It may even provide archivists with the basis for a campaign to promote the use of permanent and durable paper in the paper-making and photographic industries. Ultimately this approach will lessen the problems faced by archivists when as the last step in a long and complicated process, they receive documents from private citizens and community organizations.

Finally, the Archives of Appalachia's experiment in conservation and community outreach has produced one additional benefit from which others may also profit. By holding our conference sessions in the Archives itself, we introduced a significant number of local citizens to our institution. They left the meetings with a fuller appreciation of how the Archives functions and how it serves the community. Most importantly, it emphasized in the minds of many audience participants the vital importance of conservation as a community enterprise and the role of the Archives as the local custodian of records of historical and research value. These activities in turn have brought a number of interesting new collections to our attention. For newly established archives or for archives seeking to enlarge their community ties, our experiment and its results may prove most edifying.

In the final analysis, only considerable popular pressure will win over paper manufacturers, printers, and publishers to the idea of producing materials that will survive the tests of time. And it is only through public insistence that we can insure the design and construction of buildings capable of providing the proper environment for the storage of our records. To succeed in this struggle will require diligence, preseverence, and inventiveness on the part of the archival and library professions. Perhaps some of our colleagues will adapt the examples presented in this essay when addressing the problems that they face in their own communities. But whatever they decide, the time for action and public involvement has arrived. Community education is an important first step towards the realization of our goals and the survival of our documentary heritage.

NOTES

[1]For example, the 1978 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists included a session, entitled: "Conservation of Archives and Manuscripts: Searching for a Solution," where Frazer G. Poole and Edward Gilbert discussed the role of the community in conservation efforts. Both talks demonstrated imaginative thinking and flexibility in dealing with conservation problems from a professional perspective.

[2]The term "conservation" encompasses two closely related activities, preservation and restoration. Preservation refers to the process of eliminating or at least limiting the deteriorating effects of the environment on artifacts and documents, and restoration refers to returning an object to its original appearance while retaining as much as possible its original components. Within this context, the term "inherent fault" describes a state whereby - due to the object's construction or manufacture - an artifact or document will self-destruct because of its internal weaknesses, as in the case of newsprint (high acidity) and nitrate film (chemical instability).

[3]See, for example, George Daniel Martin Cunha and Dorthy Grant Cunha,

Conservation of Library Materials, 2nd ed., Vols. 1-2 (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1971 and 1972); and Peter Waters, Procedures for Salvage of Water-Damaged Library Materials, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1975). The second volume of Cunha provides the reader with the most extensive bibliography to date in the field of paper conservation. It is much less useful in the areas of audio-visual and machine-readable records conservation. For these highly specialized subjects, the reader may want to consult the Archives of Radio and Television at the Library of Congress and the Machine-Readable Records Division of the National Archives and Records Service respectively for further information. The Preservation Office of the Library of Congress currently has the following Preservation Leaflet titles in print: "Selected References in the Literature of Conservation," "Environmental Protection of Books and Related Materials," "Preserving Leather Bookbindings," "Marketing Manuscripts," and "Preserving Newspapers and Newspaper-Type Materials." The Office projects the release of ten further leaflets in the near future. All of these leaflets are well written, highly informative, and available without charge from the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540. For those Archives without the need or resources to produce their own conservation booklet, these leaflets represent a useful if not ideal alternative.

*Editor's Note: Copies of Dr. Kesner's compilation A Primer for the Conservation of Book and Manuscript Materials may be purchased for $1.00 by writing to:

The Archives of Applachia
Sherrod Library
East Tennessee State University
Johnson City, Tennessee 37601

Designed for laymen, the Primer, will be reviewed in the next issue of Georgia Archive.